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# Design Considerations for Siting Grade Control Structures

*by David S. Biedenharn and Lisa C. Hubbard*

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this Coastal and Hydraulics Engineering Technical Note (CHETN) is to provide guidance and highlight possible areas of concern that may require consideration before siting grade control structures.

**INTRODUCTION:** In the widest sense, the term grade control can be applied to any alteration in the watershed which provides stability to the streambed. By far the most common method of establishing grade control is the construction of in-channel grade control structures. There are two basic types of grade control structures. One type can be referred to as a bed control structure as it is designed to provide a hard point in the streambed that is capable of resisting the erosive forces of the degradational zone. The second type can be referred to as a hydraulic control structure as it is designed to function by reducing the energy slope along the degradational zone to the point that the stream is no longer capable of scouring the bed. The distinction between the operating processes of these two types is important whenever grade control structures are considered.

Design considerations for siting grade control structures include determination of the type, location, and spacing of structures along the stream, along with the elevation and dimensions of structures. Siting grade control structures is often considered a simple optimization of hydraulics and economics. However, these factors alone are usually not sufficient to define the optimum siting conditions for grade control structures. In practice, hydraulic considerations must be integrated with a host of other factors, which vary from site to site, to determine the final structure plan. Some of the more important factors to be considered when siting grade control structures are discussed in the following paragraphs.

**HYDRAULIC CONSIDERATIONS:** One of the most important steps in the siting of a grade control structure or a series of structures is the determination of the anticipated drop at the structure. This requires some knowledge of the ultimate channel morphology, both upstream and downstream of the structure, which involves assessment of sediment transport and channel morphologic processes.

The hydraulic siting of grade control structures is a critical element of the design process, particularly when a series of structures is planned. The design of each structure is based on the anticipated tailwater or downstream bed elevation which, in turn, is a function of the next structure downstream. Heede and Mulich (1973) suggested that the optimum spacing of structures is such that the upstream structure does not interfere with the deposition zone of the next downstream structure. Mussetter (1982) showed that the optimum spacing should be the length of the deposition above the structure, which is a function of the deposition slope (Figure 1). Figure 1 also illustrates the recommendations of Johnson and Minaker (1944) that the most desirable spacing can be determined by extending a line from the top of the first

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structure at a slope equal to the maximum equilibrium slope of sediment upstream until it intersects the original streambed.

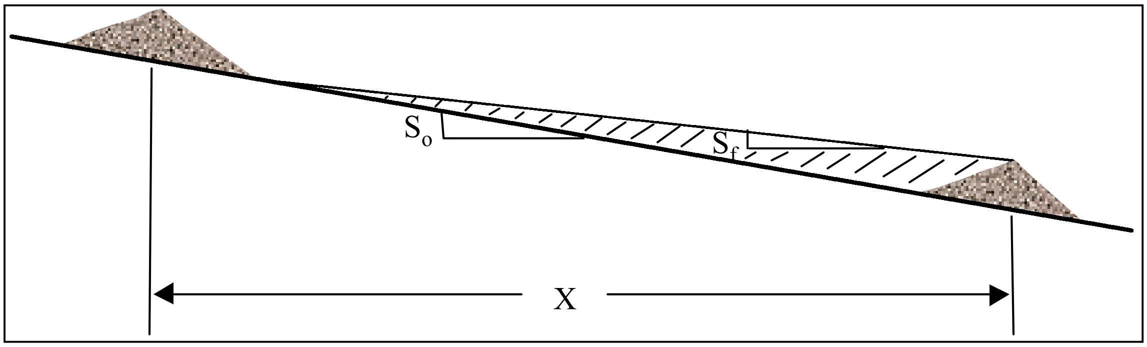



Figure 1. Spacing of grade control structure (adapted from Mussetter 1982)

Theoretically, the hydraulic siting of grade control structures is straightforward and can be determined by:

$$H = (S_o - S_f)X \tag{1}$$

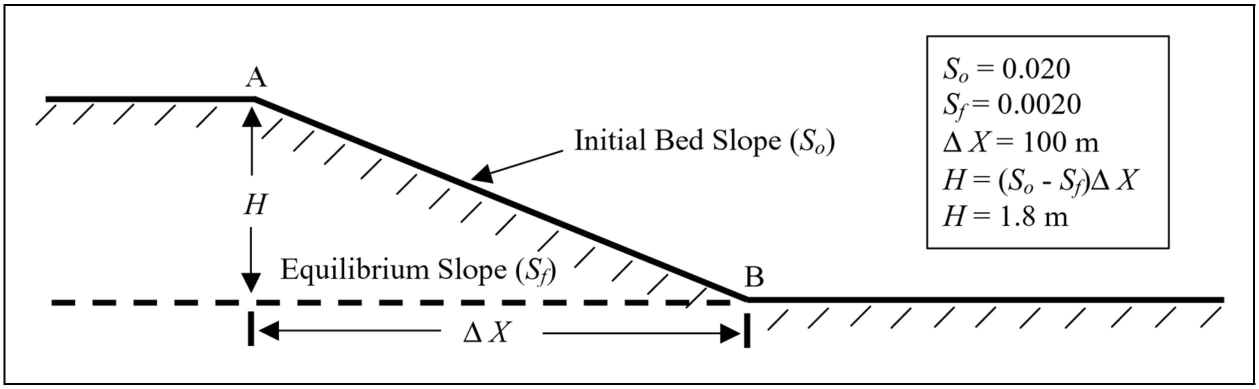
where $H$ is the amount of drop to be removed from the reach, $S_o$ is the original bed slope, $S_f$ is the final, or equilibrium slope, and $X$ is the length of the reach (Goitom and Zeller 1989). The number of structures ($N$) required for a given reach can then be determined by:

$$N = H/h \tag{2}$$

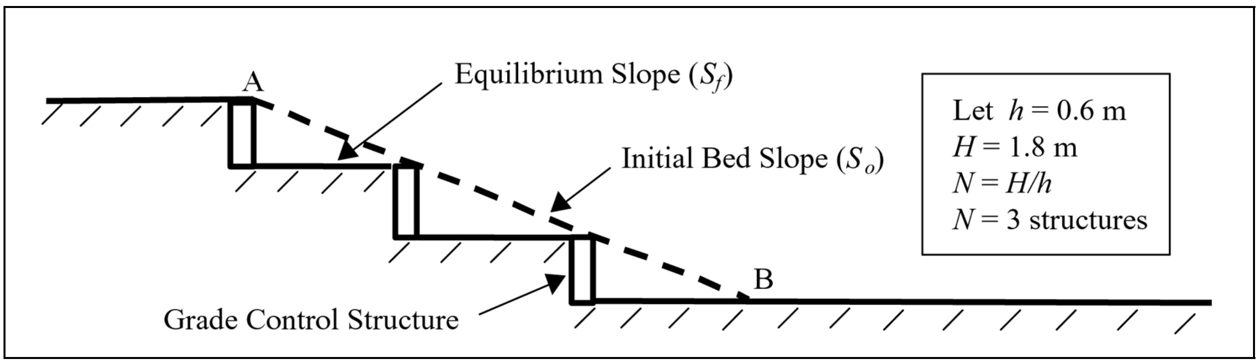
where h is the selected drop height of the structure.

The hydraulic siting of a series of bed control structures using the preceding procedure is illustrated in Figure 2. In contrast to bed control structures which are built at grade and the bed allowed to degrade between them (Figure 2b), hydraulic control structures are constructed with a raised and possibly constricted weir crest that drowns out the degradational zone (Figure 3b). It follows from Equation 1 that one of the most important factors to consider when siting grade control structures is the determination of the equilibrium slope ($S_f$). Unfortunately, this is also one of the most difficult parameters to define with any reliability. Failure to properly define the equilibrium slope can lead to costly, overly conservative designs, or inadequate design resulting in continued maintenance problems and possible complete failure of the structures.

The primary factors affecting the final equilibrium slope upstream of a structure include the incoming sediment concentration and load, the channel characteristics (slope, width, depth, roughness, etc.), and the hydraulic effect of the structure. Another complicating factor is the amount of time it takes for the equilibrium slope to develop. In some instances, the equilibrium slope may develop over a period of a few hydrographs while in others, it may take many years.



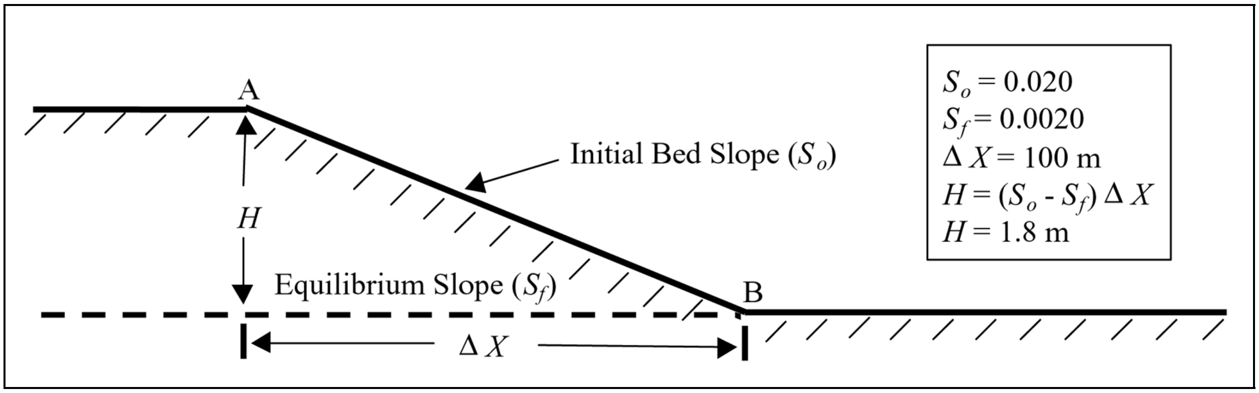

a. Initial condition of streambed showing degradational zone between points A and B. Total anticipated drop in reach is calculated to be 1.8 m




b. Stabilization of degradational zone using three bed control structures. Each structure has a design drop of 0.6 m

Figure 2. Hydraulic siting of bed control structures

There are many different methods for determining the equilibrium slope in a channel (Mussetter 1982; Federal Interagency Stream Restoration Working Group 1988; Watson, Biedenharn, and Scott 1999). These can range from detailed sediment transport modeling (Thomas et al. 1994; HQUSACE 1993) to less elaborate procedures involving empirical or process-based relationships such as regime analysis (Lacey 1931; Simons and Albertson 1963), tractive stress (Lane 1953a,b; Simons 1957; Simons and Sentürk 1992; HQUSACE 1994), or minimum permissible velocity (USDA 1977). In some cases, the equilibrium slope may be based solely on field experience with similar channels in the area. Regardless of the procedure used, the engineer must recognize the uses and limitations of that procedure before applying it to a specific situation. The decision to use one method or another depends upon several factors such as the level of study (reconnaissance or detail design), availability and reliability of data, project objectives, and time and cost constraints.

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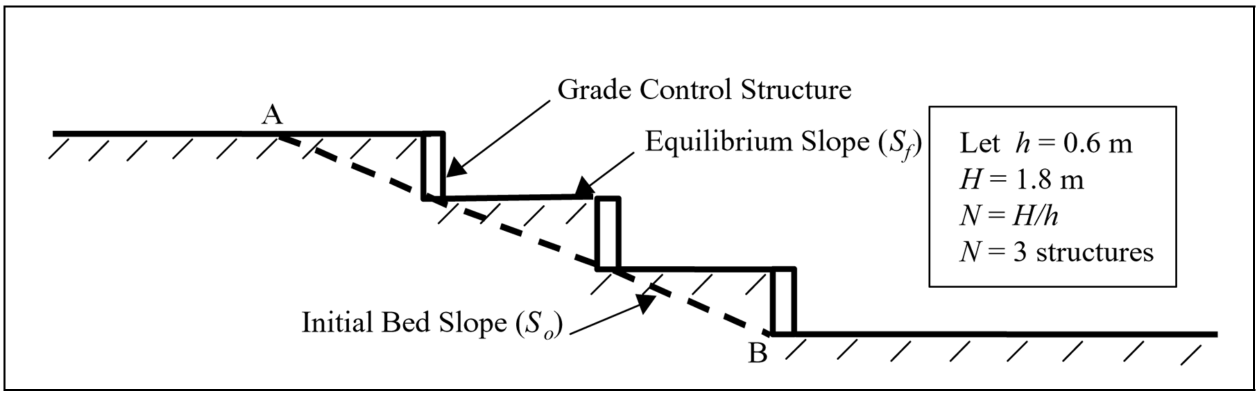


b. Stabilization of degradational zone using three hydraulic control structures. Each structure has a design drop of 0.6 m

Figure 3. Hydraulic siting of hydraulic control structures

**GEOTECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS:** The preceding discussion focused only on the hydraulic aspects of siting grade control structures. However, in some cases, the geotechnical stability of the reach may be an important or even the primary factor to consider when siting grade control structures. This is often the case where channel degradation has caused, or is anticipated to cause, severe bank instability due to exceedance of the critical bank height (Thorne and Osman 1988). When this occurs, bank instability may be widespread throughout the system rather than restricted to the concave banks in bendways. Traditional bank stabilization measures may not be feasible in situations where system-wide bank instabilities exist. In these instances, grade control may be the more appropriate solution.

Grade control structures can enhance the bank stability of a channel in several ways. Bed control structures indirectly affect the bank stability by stabilizing the bed, thereby reducing the length of bank line that achieves an unstable height. With hydraulic control structures, two additional advantages with respect to bank stability are: (a) bank heights are reduced due to sediment deposition, which increases the stability of the banks with regard to mass failure; and (b) by

creating a backwater situation, velocities and scouring potential are reduced, which reduces or eliminates the severity and extent of basal cleanout of the failed bank material, thereby promoting self-healing of the banks.

**FLOOD CONTROL IMPACTS:** Channel improvements for flood control and channel stability often appear to be mutually exclusive objectives. For this reason, it is important to ensure that any increased postproject flood potential is identified. This is particularly important when hydraulic control structures are considered. In these instances, the potential for causing overbank flooding may be the limiting factor with respect to the height and amount of constriction at the structure. Grade control structures are often designed to be hydraulically submerged at flows less than bank-full so that the frequency of overbank flooding is not affected. However, if the structure exerts control through a wider range of flows including overbank, then the frequency and duration of overbank flows may be impacted. When this occurs, the impacts must be quantified and appropriate provisions such as acquiring flowage easements or modifying structure plans should be implemented.

Another factor that must be considered is the safe return of overbank flows back into the channel. This is particularly a problem when the flows are out of bank upstream of the structure but still within bank downstream. The resulting head differential can cause damage to the structure as well as severe erosion of the channel banks depending upon where the flow re-enters the channel. Some means of controlling the overbank return flows must be incorporated into the structure design. One method is simply to design the structure to be submerged below the top bank elevation, thereby reducing the potential for a head differential to develop across the structure during overbank flows. If the structure exerts hydraulic control throughout a wider range of flows including overbank, then a more direct means of controlling the overbank return flows must be provided. One method is to ensure that all flows pass only through the structure. This may be accomplished by building an earthen dike or berm extending from the structure to the valley walls which prevents any overbank flows from passing around the structure (Forsythe 1985). Another means of controlling overbank flows is to provide an auxiliary high-flow structure which will pass the overbank flows to a specified downstream location where the flows can re-enter the channel without causing significant damage (Hite and Pickering 1982).

**ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS:** In today's environment, projects must work in harmony with the natural system to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Engineers and geomorphologists are responding to this challenge by trying to develop new and innovative methods for incorporating environmental features into channel projects. The final siting and design of a grade control structure is often modified to minimize adverse environmental impacts to the system.

Grade control structures can produce positive environmental impacts on a channel system in a number of ways. Grade control structures are typically placed in severely unstable stream reaches. By preventing the headward migration of zones of degradation, grade control structures provide vertical stability to the stream and reduce the amount of sediment eroded from the streambed and banks. This not only protects the upstream reaches from the destabilizing effects of bed lowering, but can also minimize sedimentation problems in the downstream reaches.

Therefore, the impacts of grade control structures are not restricted to a local area around the structure, but can have far-reaching impacts on the whole channel system.

Grade control structures can provide direct environmental benefits to a stream. Cooper and Knight (1987) conducted a study of fisheries resources below natural scour holes and man-made pools below grade control structures in north Mississippi. They concluded that, although there was greater species diversity in the natural pools, there was increased growth of game fish and a larger percentage of harvestable-size fish in the man-made pools. They also observed that the man-made pools provided greater stability of reproductive habitat. Shields et al. (1990) reported that the physical aquatic habitat diversity was higher in stabilized reaches of Twentymile Creek, MS, than in reaches without grade control structures. They attributed the higher diversity values to the scour holes and low-flow channels created by the grade control structures. The use of grade control structures as environmental features is not limited to the low-gradient sand bed streams of the southeastern United States. Jackson (1974) documented the use of gabion grade control structures to stabilize a high-gradient trout stream in New York. She observed that, following construction of a series of bed sills, there was a significant increase in the density of trout. The increase in trout density was attributed to the accumulation of gravel between the sills which improved the spawning habitat for various species of trout.

Adverse environmental impacts can also be associated with grade control structures. During the construction of any structure there is always the potential for the destruction of riparian habitat. However, with grade control structures, these impacts are usually limited to a localized area at the structure as opposed to other types of channel improvement features (levees, bank stabilization, or channelization) where habitat destruction may occur continuously over long reaches of stream.

Perhaps the most serious negative environmental impact of grade control structures is the obstruction to fish passage. In many instances, fish passage is one of the primary considerations and may lead the engineer to select several small fish passable structures in lieu of one or more high drops that would restrict fish passage. In some cases, particularly when drop heights are small, fish are able to migrate upstream past a structure during high flows (Cooper and Knight 1987). However, in situations where structures are impassable, and where the migration of fish is an important concern, openings, fish ladders, or other passageways must be incorporated into the design of the structure to address the fish movement problems (Nunnally and Shields 1985). The various methods of accomplishing fish movement through structures are not discussed here. Interested readers are referred to Nunnally and Shields (1985); Clay (1961); and Smith (1985) for a more detailed discussion.

Other potentially adverse impacts associated with grade control structures include changed substrate character due to sediment deposition, increased water temperature, altered energy and transport characteristics, general habitat modification, and reduction in stream dynamics including riparian succession. There may also be social considerations that should be considered, especially safety.

The environmental aspects of the project must be an integral component of the design process when siting grade control structures. A detailed study of all environmental features in the project

area should be conducted early in the design process. This will allow these factors to be incorporated into the initial plan rather than having to make costly and often less environmentally effective last minute modifications to the final design. Unfortunately, there is very little published guidance concerning the incorporation of environmental features into the design of grade control structures. One source of useful information can be found in the following technical reports published by the U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC) Environmental Laboratory: Shields and Palermo (1982); Henderson and Shields (1984); and Nunnally and Shields (1985).

**EXISTING STRUCTURES:** Bed degradation can cause significant damage to bridges, culverts, pipelines, utility lines, and other structures along the channel perimeter. Grade control structures can prevent this degradation and thereby provide protection to these structures. For this reason, it is important to locate all potentially impacted structures when siting grade control structures. The final siting should be modified, as needed, within project restraints, to ensure protection of existing structures.

It must also be recognized that grade control structures can have adverse as well as beneficial effects on existing structures. This is a concern upstream of hydraulic control structures due to the potential for increased stages and sediment deposition. In these instances, the possibility of submerging upstream structures such as water intakes or drainage structures may become a deciding factor in the siting of grade control structures.

Whenever possible, the designer should take advantage of any existing structures which may already be providing some measure of grade control. This usually involves culverts or other structures that provide a nonerodible surface across the streambed. Unfortunately, these structures are usually not initially designed to accommodate any significant bed lowering and, therefore, cannot be relied on to provide long-term grade control. However, it may be possible to modify these structures to protect against the anticipated degradation. These modifications may be accomplished by simply adding some additional riprap with launching capability at the downstream end of the structure. In other situations, more elaborate modifications such as providing a sheet pile cutoff wall or energy dissipation devices may be required. Damage to and failure of bridges is the natural consequence of channel degradation. Consequently, it is not uncommon in a channel stabilization project to have several bridges that are in need of repair or replacement. In these situations it is often advantageous to integrate the grade control structure into the planned improvements at the bridge. If the bridge is not in immediate danger of failing and only needs some additional erosion protection, the grade control structure can be built at or immediately downstream of the bridge with the riprap from the structure tied into the bridge for protection. If the bridge is to be replaced, then it may be possible to construct the grade control structure concurrently with the road crossing.

**LOCAL SITE CONDITIONS:** When planning grade control structures, the final siting is often adjusted to accommodate local site conditions, such as the planform of the stream or local drainage. A stable upstream alignment that provides a straight approach into the structure is critical. Since failure to stabilize the upstream approach may lead to excessive scour and possible flanking of the structure, it is desirable to locate the structure in a straight reach. If this is not possible (as in the case in a very sinuous channel), it may be necessary to realign the

channel to provide an adequate approach. Stabilization of the realigned channel may be required to ensure that the approach is maintained. Even if the structure is built in a straight reach, the possibility of upstream meanders migrating into the structure must be considered. In this case, the upstream meanders should be stabilized prior to, or concurrent with, the construction of the grade control structure.

Local inflows from tributaries, field drains, roadside ditches, or other sources often play an important part in the siting of grade control structures. Failure to provide protection from local drainage can result in severe damage to a structure (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1981). During the initial siting of the structure, all local drainage should be identified. Ideally, the structure should be located to avoid local drainage problems. However, there may be some situations where this is not possible. In these instances, the local drainage should either be redirected away from the structure or incorporated into the structure design in such a manner that there will be no damage to the structure.

**DOWNSTREAM CHANNEL RESPONSE:** Since grade control structures affect the sediment delivery to downstream reaches, it is necessary to consider the potential impacts to the downstream channel when grade control structures are planned. Bed control structures reduce the downstream sediment loading by preventing the erosion of the bed and banks, while hydraulic control structures have the added effect of trapping sediments. The ultimate response of the channel to the reduction in sediment supply will vary from site to site. In some instances, the effects of grade control structures on sediment loading may be so small that downstream degradational problems may not be encountered. However, in some situations such as when a series of hydraulic control structures is planned, the cumulative effects of sediment trapping may become significant. In these instances, it may be necessary to modify the plan to reduce the amount of sediment being trapped or to consider placing additional grade control structures in the downstream reach to protect against the induced degradation.

**GEOLOGIC CONTROLS:** Geologic controls often provide grade control in a similar manner to a bed control structure. In some cases, a grade control structure can actually be eliminated from the plan if an existing geologic control can be utilized to provide a similar level of bed stability. However, caution must always be used when relying on geologic outcrops to provide long- term grade control. In situations where geologic controls are to be used as permanent grade control structures, a detailed geotechnical investigation of the outcrop is needed to determine its vertical and lateral extent. This is necessary to ensure that the outcrop will neither be eroded, undermined, or flanked during the project life.

**EFFECTS ON TRIBUTARIES:** The effect of main stem structures on tributaries should be considered when siting grade control structures. As degradation on a main stem channel migrates upstream it may branch up into the tributaries. Therefore, the siting of grade control structures should consider effects on the tributaries. If possible, main stem structures should be placed downstream of tributary confluences. This will allow one structure to provide grade control to both the main stem and the tributary. This is generally a more cost-effective procedure than having separate structures on each channel.

**SUMMARY:** The preceding discussion illustrates that the siting of grade control structures is not simply a hydraulic exercise, and there are many other factors that must be included in the design process. For any specific situation, some or all of the factors discussed in this section may be critical elements in the final siting of grade control structures. It is recognized that this does not represent an all inclusive list since there may be other factors not discussed here that may be locally important. For example, in some cases, maintenance requirements, debris passage, ice conditions, esthetics or safety considerations may be controlling factors. Consequently, there is no definitive cookbook procedure for siting grade control structures that can be applied universally. Rather, each situation must be assessed on an individual basis.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** Questions about this CHETN can be addressed to David S. Biedenharn (601-634-4653), e-mail: *David.S.Biedenharn@erdc.usace.army.mil* or Lisa C. Hubbard (601-634-4150), e-mail: *Lisa.C.Hubbard@erdc.usace.army.mil*. This CHETN should be referenced as follows:

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